

Public Parking Commission Gives Voice to Commuter Woes

By Crystal Rawls

The citizen-led Public Parking Commission, approved by Mayor Bill White in August 2005, has many business leaders wondering how such an organization is going to ease parking woes and bring sanity to what may seem like an area of chaos.

Made up of local residents and business leaders and modeled after successful commissions in several U.S. cities, Houston's Parking Commission is the first of its kind in Texas, existing to give voice to public concerns, its members striving to direct parking management in resolving issues.

In addition, Commissioners are responsible for recommending parking-related ordinances and capital improvement projects to City Council, gathering and reviewing information relating to the City's present and future parking needs, maintaining a comprehensive inventory of the on-street parking supply and recommending to City Council all matters for the management, development and advancement of the City's parking needs or facilities.

Bottom line: because of the Parking Commission's efforts, business leaders will be able to confidently welcome out-of-town associates, potential clients and future employees to a parking-friendly city.

"Each of the commissioners carries the voice of a neighborhood or business area where the city can help to improve the economic development or quality of life of the neighborhood by improving the number of parking spaces, quality



of parking or research and adopting parking policies that would be beneficial to all," said Liliana Rambo, Assistant Director for Parking Management, a division of the Convention and Entertainment Facilities Department. Parking Management services maintains almost 6,000 on-street parking spaces and garages across the Greater Houston area.

Nine mayor-appointed members and six ex-officio members representing various business entities, as well as social service and government agencies, serve for one or two-year terms on a volunteer basis. Already the Commission has held several public hearings, receiving input from local citizens on such matters as disabled, residential and valet parking issues, voting to send suggestions to the Legal Department for the formation of ordinance changes. Issues discussed include placing additional "No Parking" signs along streets in the Midtown, Montrose, Rice Military and Third Ward areas, in order to allow emergency vehicles faster access; and setting time limits for the approximately 150 downtown disabled street parking spaces.

Liliana Rambo, Assistant Director for Parking Management, a division of the Convention and Entertainment Facilities Department, offers the following parking tips to ensure safe and sufficient parking and to reduce the chances of receiving a citation or tow:

Read signs carefully. Many downtown streets have special tow-away and truck loading zones during commute hours. These restrictions carry heavy fines, and your vehicle may be towed at your own expense. Also be aware of street cleaning signs, which apply to different times and days throughout the City.

Be aware of colored curbs. Red stripes signify no parking or tow-away zones. All vehicles will be cited and/or towed for parking in these zones at any time.

Check parking time limits: Many spaces have a two-hour time limit to encourage parking turnover. Parking time limits apply even if the meter is broken. Remember the City of Houston operates meters on Saturdays, so be sure to check the meter when parking. For longer parking periods, use a parking garage or lot.

Sidewalks are for pedestrian use: City of Houston Code prohibits parking a vehicle on any portion of the sidewalk at any time. Many driveways in Houston include the sidewalk, considered the public right-of-way. Avoid a citation for this violation by leaving the sidewalk portion of your driveway clear.

Parking on the wrong side of the street is not only a safety hazard – it's illegal. Vehicles parked on the wrong side of the street are forced to face oncoming vehicles when merging into traffic, putting themselves and other drivers at risk.



PAPER OR PLASTIC?

Houston's new solar-powered pay stations offer parkers more payment options than the standard coin-only meters, making paying for parking more convenient than ever.

NO CHANGE? NO PROBLEM.

Not only do the new pay stations accept nickels, dimes, quarters and dollar coins, but also paper bills and Visa or MasterCard credit and debit cards.

With fewer pay stations per block, sidewalks are less cluttered, giving pedestrians more walking space. "Pay to Park" signs with directional arrows line each block, directing parkers to each pay station.

"At the City of Houston Department of Parking Management, we believe parking should be painless," said Rambo. "In the future, (the Parking Commission) will work with other areas in the city where parking is scarce but badly needed in order to promote and help businesses and employees within the area."

WINPARK Senior Parking Manager, Dan Medlin, is hopeful that the Commission will bring together city departments to create a plan "that encourages inner-city development, and keeps Houston a commuter-friendly city, while looking to the future growth of Houston. A city the size of Houston will benefit greatly from a parking commission."

Medlin offered his expert opinion for commuters as well as business

owners when it comes to parking. He noted the parking facilities closest to the "traffic generator" commanding the highest prices. For instance, a parking lot close to Minute Maid Park will charge \$20 prior to a baseball game and only \$3 during peak office parking hours.

"One way to balance this swing in demand, is to take advantage of a shared parking program that occurs sometimes by accident or by planned multi-use developments such as The Galleria, which contains three office towers, two hotels and over a million square feet of retail, entertainment and dining. The different venues complement each other because their peak traffic demands rarely overlap."

The public is invited to ask questions or voice public parking concerns during Public Parking Commission meetings held at 2 p.m. the first and third Wednesday of each month in the City Hall Annex Chambers, 900 Bagby. For more information, visit www.houstonparking.org, call 713-837-0311 or you can email parking@cityofhouston.net. **N**

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Downtown Hopper Pass

Make visiting downtown Houston a snap with the Downtown Hopper Pass. Paying only \$6 at any pay station allows you to park at multiple metered spaces throughout the Central Business District. Time limit on each meter applies.

